The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

EUROPE

Why Russia is wooing South Africa's white farmers

By Amie Ferris-Rotman

September 23, 2018 at 6:16 p.m. EDT

KOSYAKOVO, Russia — Leon du Toit slowly inhales the late summer breeze off fields belonging to a dairy farm not far from Moscow. "Smells just like home," the 72-year-old South African said.

That's just what one Russian political figure hopes to hear.

He is leading something of a charm offensive in South Africa with a very particular goal: hoping to lure white South Africans to move 8,000 miles away to rural Russia.

The selling points are abundant farmland, relative safety and a country that holds tight to traditional Christian values.

What is not said — but clearly understood — is how this fits neatly into the identity politics of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The West may view Putin largely as a strategic and military adversary. Yet inside Russia, much of his support grows from the idea of Russia as the caretaker for a white, Christian and old-style order — rejecting "so-called tolerance, genderless and infertile," in Putin's own words in 2013.

Such comments have helped elevate Putin's stature among populists and nativist-driven political movements in the West. And, within Russia, they have boosted the efforts of political insiders such as Vladimir Poluboyarenko, a government liaison from the Stavropol region in southern Russia.

Poluboyarenko has taken the lead in organizing trips to Russia for white South Africans considering making a move.

The effort intersects with many issues. There is Russia's declining population and fresh ambitions to protect fellow Christians. Add to that the unease among some white South African farmers as the country debates possible land redistribution to redress racial imbalances during apartheid.

Poluboyarenko claims he funds the trips for the South Africans with his own savings, but such activity would almost certainly need the Kremlin's blessing.

According to a Pew Research Center report last year, fewer than 10,000 South Africans live in Russia. Last April, Russia scrapped tourist visa requirements for South Africans, meaning all planned visits by South Africans are no longer reviewed in advance.

"I want them to know that Russia can be their mother country, too," said Poluboyarenko, who assists the human rights ombudsman in the agricultural heartland of Stavropol.

Du Toit, a missionary preacher, is weighing the offer.

He and his 39-year-old son, Johannes du Toit, a former minister, came on a scouting mission.

Whites still own the majority of land in South Africa, despite making up less than 10 percent of the population of 56 million. But du Toit represents the fears among some white farmers that the political trajectory of South Africa, such as the issue of land ownership, is not on their side.

On a hazy afternoon, the du Toit men were led through a meadow thick with alfalfa. Du Toit leaned down to pluck a stem and started chewing its leaves. His Russian hosts looked on, somewhat hesitantly, before clapping in glee at the elder du Toit's appreciation.

Poluboyarenko took his visitors around a swath of Russian countryside over several days, introducing them to local farmers in Russia's breadbasket.

"We understand that our government must listen to the majority of the people," said Johannes du Toit. Landscapes of wheat fields and piles of watermelons became a blur through his car window.

"But we don't want our children to suffer from the roll of the dice."

The purported plight of white South Africans — long a rallying cry of global far-right movements — caught the attention of President Trump last month. After watching a segment about the issue on Fox News, he asked Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to study the "large-scale killing" of white farmers and the government's land expropriation issue.

The tweet was the president's first, at least while in office, to contain the word "Africa." South Africa's government denounced Trump's remarks.

The Kremlin, which enjoys close ties with the South African government after years of Cold War-era support for the ruling African National Congress party (ANC), had yet to officially comment on the land redistribution proposals.

But the white South Africans are given airtime on state television.

“Global media and Twitter and others — of course those with particular motives — have spread a warped representation of the African National Congress’s formal statement of intent with regards to expropriation,” said Wandile Sihlobo, a lead researcher at South Africa’s Agricultural Business Chamber, referring to the proposals for land redistribution.

“But we also lack clear communication from policymakers,” Sihlobo added, “which fuels fear and misinformation.”

There are no figures made public on the number of South Africans who have moved to Russia or are considering it. Poluboyarenko, however, is a prominent voice for the outreach. He gained attention earlier this year after helping an 11-member German family, outraged by sex education in Western schools, to settle in Russia.

Addressing the du Toits at his “Motherland” dairy farm in Kosyakovo, about 60 miles southeast of Moscow, general director Mikhail Baranov told the father and son: “You can be sure of one thing. You won’t find liberalism here, but family values instead.”

Such sentiment could hold appeal for the group of white South Africans who call themselves Boers, meaning “farmer” in Dutch. They are descendants of the Dutch settlers who came to southern Africa in the 17th century and have an identity rooted in the Dutch Reformed Church, the Afrikaans language and a shared history of pioneering.

The elder du Toit recalls his first trip to Russia in 2006, when he visited a church in St. Petersburg. “I just looked at all the kindred people, and I cried,” he said.

For South African farmer Adi Schlebusch, Russia’s religious rebirth under Putin was a decisive factor in his family’s decision to emigrate.

“The return of Christian values is a big motivation for us,” Schlebusch said by telephone from his South African cattle farm. “We thought Russian people would be sympathetic.”

In October, the 29-year-old Schlebusch, his wife and two young children plan to pack up and move to Moscow, where Schlebusch will teach English.

After returning home from his first Russian visit in July, Schlebusch spoke to other farming families in his native Free State province. He estimates that about 25 families are now seriously considering moving to Russia.

“In Russia I enjoyed the freedom of just driving about, anywhere you want to go, between fields and into forests,” said 60-year-old Jan Geldenhuys, who until recently lived in Russia, farming wheat, sunflowers and soy.

Drawn back to South Africa to see his family, he is now of two minds about returning.

If the land reform plans go ahead, Geldenhuys will soon be back in his Russian fields.

Max Bearak in Nairobi contributed to this report.